

Institution: Newcastle University
Unit of Assessment: 29 English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Poetry: Performance, Engagement and the Enrichment of Cultural Life
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>W.N. Herbert, Jackie Kay and Sean O'Brien have played central roles in the recent resurgence of interest in poetry as live performance and cultural event, and have been instrumental in a growing recognition of its power as a means of social engagement. Their research and writing have provided a foundation for the Newcastle Centre for the Literary Arts (NCLA), a University Research Centre directed by Linda Anderson. Through the NCLA they have been able (i) to build audiences for literature generally, and poetry in particular, at live events, online and in communities; (ii) to engage key groups, including young and older people, and to study creative writing's benefits for learning and wellbeing; (iii) to enhance the public understanding of poetry, by disseminating research, encouraging debate, and providing resources and new opportunities to encounter poetry.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>The key research outputs, responsible for establishing Newcastle as what the poet Ruth Padel has called 'the national centre for poetry', are the collections by Herbert, Kay and O'Brien published since they were appointed at Newcastle in 2002, 2004 and 2006 respectively. A small selection is listed below (1, 2, 3). Besides its intrinsic power to engage audiences and enrich lives, this work constitutes a sustained engagement with some of the themes that lie behind the programme of the NCLA, including issues of place (especially the North East of England), community, identity and of the significance of poets and poetry. O'Brien's <i>The Drowned Book</i> (1), for instance, winner of Forward and T. S. Eliot Prizes, 'immerses itself in ... a baleful industrial-northern landscape' (<i>Guardian</i>, 8 Sept. 2007). Kay's collected poems (2) address the ways in which people 'incarnate ... place ... whether through ethnicity or in our behaviour and language' (<i>Guardian</i>, 10 Nov. 2007). And Herbert's <i>Bad Shaman Blues</i> (3), shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize, investigates the role of the poet in modern society.</p> <p>These same themes have been taken up in their critical work. O'Brien's <i>Journey to the Interior</i> (4), for example, examines the work of contemporary poets in re-imagining ideas of England. Herbert's translation work has enriched our culture by expanding the range of poetry to which we are exposed to include poetry from Bulgaria, Lithuania, Russia, Somalia and elsewhere. His edition of contemporary Chinese verse (5), giving English-speakers access for the first time to a comprehensive selection of recent poetry from the new global superpower, has been called 'indispensable reading for anyone with an interest in the future not just of China, but of poetry.' His textbook <i>Writing Poetry</i> (6) takes a unique approach, with dialogues closing each chapter in which he discusses his ideas with prominent poets (Douglas Dunn, Jo Shapcott, Kathleen Jamie, etc.) so that readers understand how differently poets can approach their work. The book is used widely: at the Open University, elsewhere in HE, and outside the sector (e.g. via iTunes).</p> <p>All this work (along with that conducted by other poets in the NCLA: Anderson, Colette Bryce, Cynthia Fuller, Ahren Warner) emphasises the social and public functions of poetry. As such, it has brought many opportunities to take poetry into the world, through lectures and festivals, the media and public commissions. It has also been crucial as a foundation for the work of the NCLA with its mission to enhance public engagement with poetry. A series of grants has supported this mission. The 'Even Better Writers' project (G1), for instance, was developed in partnership with New Writing North and Newcastle City Council to bring writers and educationalists together to devise effective and sustainable models of creative writing teaching in schools. 'Ageing Creatively' (G2), a collaboration with Newcastle's Institute for Ageing and Health, was another NCLA research project, funded by the Medical Research Council to evaluate the uses of creative practice in promoting wellbeing in later life.</p>
<p>3. References to the research</p> <p>(1) O'Brien, S. (2007) <i>The Drowned Book</i>. London: Picador. Available on request.</p> <p>(2) Kay, J. (2007) <i>Darling: New and Selected Poems</i>. Tarsset: Bloodaxe. Available on request.</p> <p>(3) Herbert, W.N. (2006) <i>Bad Shaman Blues</i>. Tarsset: Bloodaxe. Available on request.</p> <p>(4) O'Brien, S. (2012) <i>Journey to the Interior: Ideas of England in Contemporary Poetry</i>. Tarsset:</p>

Impact case study (REF3b)

Bloodaxe. REF2 output: 177536

- (5) Herbert, W.N. & Lian, Y. (2012) *Jade Ladder: Contemporary Chinese Poetry*. Tarsnet: Bloodaxe. REF2 output: 170082.
- (6) Herbert, W.N. (2012) *Writing Poetry*. London: Routledge. Available on request.
- G1. Anderson, L. (2008) 'Even Better Writers' (£36k). Esmee Fairbairn Foundation grant, ref. 08-3715
- G2. Anderson, L. *et al* (2011). 'Ageing Creatively: a pilot study to explore the relation of creative arts interventions to wellbeing in later life' (£250k). Medical Research Council grant, ref. G1001901.

4. Details of the impact

Building new audiences

Our research has, in and of itself, gathered significant new audiences for poetry. More generally, the NCLA has been at the forefront of the recent national step-change in how poetry is disseminated, particularly online and through public events (a 'poetry renaissance' as it has often been called in the media) (**IMP1**). Herbert, Kay and O'Brien have collectively given over 150 poetry readings in the census period to audiences that, in aggregate, number more than 15,000. These have included appearances at the major literary festivals as well as events at the NCLA, including a joint performance in 2012 drawing an audience of 300. Their standing as poets has attracted an extremely impressive roster of visiting poets to the NCLA, and Herbert, Kay and O'Brien frequently host events, introducing new and well-known poets to regional audiences and engaging in public questions and debate. O'Brien, for instance, introduced Seamus Heaney to an audience of 600 in the Newcastle Civic Centre (2009) and Paul Muldoon to an audience of 250 (2010). Kay introduced Carol Ann Duffy to an audience of 500 (2009). Based on his own expertise in the translation and editing of international poetry (**5**), Herbert has brought many non-Anglophone poets to Newcastle, often in association with the British Council. He has introduced the Somali poet Gaarriye (2008), the Chinese poet Yang Lian (2010), and Burmese poets Eindra and Thitsar Ni to audiences of around 100 (2012). The 45 poetry events in the period from NCLA's foundation in 2009 to July 2013 drew an aggregated audience of 3860, an average of 86. This is twice the national average for such events, and by some distance the largest audiences for poetry ever seen in the North East. Respondents to a structured questionnaire about the value of NCLA events (April 2013) stressed the importance of live performance and of interaction through question and debate. 'Enjoying poetry is so often a private and personal experience that it is nice to encounter it in a public space and share the experience with others', wrote one respondent. Another attendee used three words to describe her experience: 'Passion, creativity, inclusion' (**IMP2**). Audio/video recording hugely extends the audiences for all these events. The recordings are freely available in the NCLA digital archive (www.nclacommunity.org). From Sept. 2011, when the archive was established, to July 2013, the archive has had 18,338 visits from 6,543 unique visitors, with a further 32,300 visits through its vimeo site.

Poetry and public life

Through commissioned projects, Herbert, Kay and O'Brien have brought poetry into new venues and situations in civic society, extending its reach and demonstrating its capacity to voice national aspirations and concerns. In 2012 alone, for instance, O'Brien's poem 'Dignified' was part of a poetry installation in the Olympic Park, was read by Dame Tanni Grey-Thompson at the Olympic Poetry event (11 June 2012), and was poem of the day in *The Times* (31 July 2012); Herbert wrote and recorded a poem for *The Guardian*, 'The Blazing Grater', about the Olympic torch passing through Tyneside (15 June 2012); O'Brien's poem 'Another Country', addressing a history of North-South relations in modern England, was written for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and read on BBC R4's *Today* programme (24 April 2012); and Kay, having been commissioned by Sheffield United FC and Off the Shelf Literature Festival, wrote a poem, 'Here's My Pitch', and read it out before kick-off at Bramall Lane stadium (29 October 2012). Based on research into Arthur Wharton, the first professional black footballer to play in the Football League, the poem was part of the anti-racist Kick It Out campaign. It received extensive press coverage.

Herbert's 'poetry plan' for the 750-home West Park estate in Darlington has continued to be deployed (2002-). Commissioned by the developer, Herbert has written verses installed throughout the 121-acre site: they are inscribed on buildings, adorn the new hospital, provide the motto for the new school and the name for the new pub. Herbert named the streets, and the couplets inscribed on each street sign make up a complete poem. The Director of Bussey & Armstrong, the

Impact case study (REF3b)

developers, hopes that 'forever walking past its rhyming couplet[s]' 'a child brought up in West Park will grow up with a strong sense of who and where they are, nourished by the storylines on which the development has been founded' (**IMP3**). The National Association for Literature Development has called Westpark 'an outstanding example of the way text and public art can imbue what is in this case a totally new community with a sense of its heritage' (**IMP4**).

Our poets have also been active in taking poetry into public life via the media. On BBC radio they have reached audiences of up to 800,000 with documentaries (e.g. O'Brien on Tennyson, and Peter Porter, and Herbert on Edwin Morgan and international poetry festivals) and with original verse dramas (e.g. O'Brien's *Take Me to the Bridge* for BBC R3). The NCLA commissioned Herbert, Kay and O'Brien to write a poem, 'Mutatis Mutandis', for BBC R3's Freethinking Festival (2011).

Enhancing and embedding the public understanding of poetry

The NCLA, and Herbert, Kay and O'Brien in particular, work hard not only to take poetry to wide audiences but to extend the range and improve the quality of debate surrounding it. NCLA staff have delivered important public lectures, such as Anderson's Royal Society of Literature Lecture (2011) and O'Brien's Sebald Lecture (2012). And the NCLA has hosted landmark lectures by major poets, including C. K. Williams' Poetry Society Lecture and Paul Muldoon's Elizabeth Bishop Centenary lectures (2011). Central to this commitment to extend debate has been the partnership with Bloodaxe Books, 'the country's leading publisher of contemporary poetry' (**IMP1**) including the annual Newcastle/Bloodaxe Poetry Lectures. During the census period they have been given by O'Brien, Jane Hirschfield, George Szirtes, Fiona Sampson, Desmond Graham and Ruth Padel, all introduced by O'Brien or Herbert. As Bloodaxe editor Neil Astley says, the series 'features poets speaking about the craft and practice of poetry to audiences drawn from both the city and the university, with these public lectures later published in book form by Bloodaxe, giving readers everywhere the opportunity to discover what leading poets have to say about their subject' (**IMP5**). These books have sold over 3000 copies in total. The acquisition in 2013 of the Bloodaxe Archive is part of the NCLA's strategy to curate and open up resources to facilitate public understanding of poetry (see also the NCLA digital archive, above). An AHRC grant (£40k) to explore and publicise the archive has already brought it into the public sphere, producing a film shown to 300 at the Festival of the North-East (July 2013), running a public roundtable event with Herbert, O'Brien, Anderson and Astley, and setting up a website presenting the archive through poems, photographs and films (<http://bloodaxearchive.nclacommunity.org>).

Public understanding of the diversity of contemporary poetry is enhanced by Herbert's research, editorial and translation work on international poets. Besides his edition of modern Chinese poetry (**5**), Herbert has translated Somali poets Gaariye (2008) and Hadraawi (2013) into English for the first time (leading to 'The Bards of Somalia', BBC R4, 28 Aug. 2010 and 'Poetry in Translation', BBC R4, 16 May 2013). He has been equally active in taking British poetry to new, non-English speaking audiences overseas, for instance at the Novi Sad Festival in Serbia (2008), workshops and performances in Pondicherry, Chennai, Pune and Kerala (2010-11) and Yangahou and Nanjing (with O'Brien, 2013), and at festivals in Turkey and Somalia (2013).

Developing new writers

Alongside their work with established poets, NCLA staff have used their research expertise to nurture new generations of poets. O'Brien, as a pre-eminent national poet, has been adjudicator for the Arts Council Escalator scheme to aid emergent poets (2010) and tutor for the BBC/Arts Council 'New Voices' scheme, (2011). He and Herbert have judged many national poetry competitions for young people during the period, including the NCLA's own. 389 young people entered a competition on the theme of 'belonging', part of the 2012 Festival of Belonging in Newcastle. Shortlisted poems were incorporated into a poetry trail across Newcastle-Gateshead. The 'Even Better Writers' research project (**G1**), led by Anderson and delivered with New Writing North during 2009-11, sought to create, investigate and evaluate effective and sustainable strategies for improving teachers' ability to teach creative writing. It was notably successful. According to the project's formal evaluation, all of the 25 teachers (from 8 schools) who took part in the research 'felt that their confidence in tackling creative writing had been increased' after the sessions (led by Herbert and NCLA colleagues) and 'that they had developed new skills and strategies for improving creative writing.' The 1080 pupils who were direct participants also

benefitted. According to the data submitted by the schools, 82% exceeded their anticipated grade, 14% met it, and only 4% fell below it. Interviewed pupils felt that the sessions ‘raised confidence and self esteem.’ In particular, the project overcame resistance to poetry, among both teachers and pupils. Teachers talked about having ‘more ideas for poetry’ and having fewer misgivings about teaching it. Pupils commented that ‘poetry fills your head with ideas’ and that ‘poetry would help with all your writing really ... I think if you can get your head around poetry you can probably do all sorts of writing better’ (IMP6). The project has gone on to inspire other similar interventions. An NCLA project supported by the Clore Duffield Foundation, called ‘Young Voices: Using Digital Resources to Develop Reading and Writing’, is now assessing the use of digital resources to develop children’s creative writing. And beyond Newcastle, a 2010 Arts Council England report cited ‘Even Better Writers’ as evidence that ‘inspiration does not have to be at the expense of standards’ (IMP7). In 2010, following the Motion Report, the charity Creativity Culture and Education was granted £200k to develop, deliver and evaluate three new poetry projects (‘Well Versed’) to ‘build on the learning gained from ... *Even Better Writers* programme’ (IMP8). Another recommendation of the report was the £100k development by The Poetry Society of a Young Poets Network, a resource to which NCLA writers have contributed (e.g. Anderson’s entry on Bishop). The NCLA has also created the website ‘Young Voices’ as an interactive resource where work by young people is showcased and supported with tips, discussion and competitions (<http://youngvoices.nclacommunity.org/>).

Poetry and Wellbeing

The NCLA is concerned with researching the ways in which poetry can be used to improve wellbeing. One strand of this is a course for healthcare professionals on the use of poetry in health settings. The NCLA has run the course throughout the census period reaching 78 participants whose feedback has highlighted the inspiration they were able ‘to bring back to their practice as health professionals’. A second strand has been the MRC-funded ‘Ageing Creatively’ project, exploring the health and social benefits to older people of engaging in creative arts activity, including writing poetry (G2). Through analysis of the processes as well as the outcomes of the creative interventions, and using a medical methodology, the project has laid a foundation for accurate assessment of the effects on participants’ wellbeing of engaging in creative writing. The findings can now be analysed with a view to deciding the efficacy of GPs prescribing creative activities. What post-project interviews demonstrate is that later-life participants benefitted: ‘I would say that the workshops definitely enhanced my well-being,’ said one, ‘for the reasons ... like, belonging to a group where you feel safe, where you connect with people in a meaningful way. I think those things must have a positive impact on your self-esteem, on your confidence’. Another said simply ‘I’m sure creativity, and finding what is right for you as a person is a key to well-being’ (IMP9).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- IMP1** Felicity Spector, ‘Ted Hughes memorial marks poetic evolution’, Channel 4, 6 Dec. 2011. <http://www.channel4.com/news/ted-hughes-memorial-marks-uk-poetrys-evolution>.
- IMP2** Collected data from the NCLA questionnaire, April 2013.
- IMP3** ‘Writing West Park: Writing at the Heart of the Community’. Arts Council England, West Park, New Writing North and others. No date.
- IMP4** Sarah Butler, ‘A Place for Words - Literature Development and Regeneration’, National Association for Literature Development. Online. No date.
- IMP5** Neil Astley, editor of Bloodaxe Books. Testimonial letter. 29 October 2013.
- IMP6** Caroline Redmond, ‘Even Better Writers. Final Evaluation Report’. May 2010.
- IMP7** Sue Horner, *Magic Dust That Lasts. Writers in Schools – Sustaining the Momentum*. Arts Council England Writers in Schools report, 2010.
- IMP8** *The Motion Report: Poetry and Young People. A report from the Poetry and Young People Project Review Group*. Booktrust, 2010.
- IMP9** Collected data from the Ageing Creatively Project feedback.

All sources can be provided on request.